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ABSTRACT

Presented is a position paper on learning disabilities developed by the Region 9 Task Force (State education directors or their designates from Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Vermont). It is explained that the Task Force met in March 1976 to share state and regional concerns about definitions, identification guidelines, and personnel preparation procedures. Described is the outcome of a subsequent meeting in May at which task force members drafted the position paper. Stating that the label as well as the category of learning disabilities is unnecessary, the paper lists nine conclusions, including the need for a major change in our conception of exceptional children and the importance of a better relationship between general and special education. (CL)

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POSITION PAPER

on

LEARNING DISABILITIES

Northeast Regional Resource Center

Task Force on Learning Disabilities

July 1976

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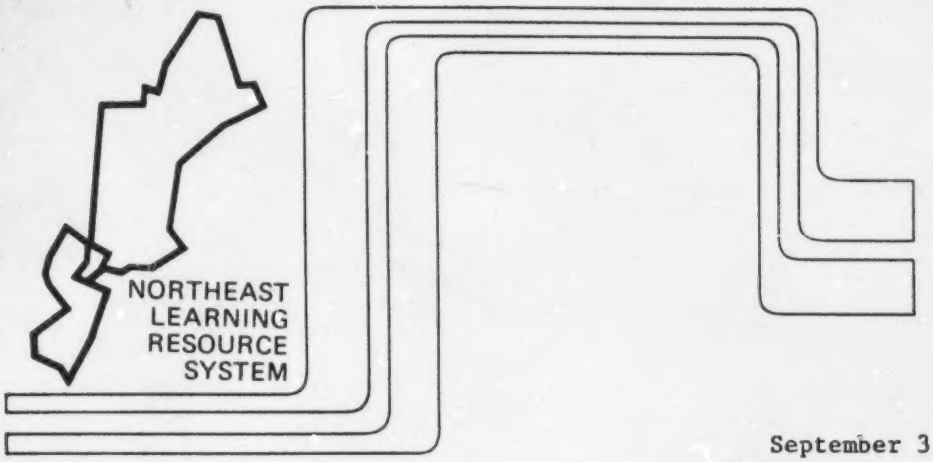

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September 3, 1976

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Dear Dr. Martin:

The enclosed document represents the efforts of Region 9 to provide a statement reflecting regional concerns about the issue of learning disabilities.

In the summer of 1975 the Region 9 Advisory Board, comprised of the State Directors of Special Education or their designates in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Vermont, requested that the Northeast Learning Resource System/Regional Resource Center develop a position paper relative to learning disabilities in the region.

The Advisory Board was concerned with the process for identifying youngsters with learning disabilities, including such matters as operational definitions, the need for a definition, potential overloading of the category of learning disabilities and the possible fragmentation of services.

Subsequently, the Northeast Regional Resource Center, in conjunction with the seven State Resource Consultants, established a Task Force comprised of one representative from each state knowledgeable in the field of learning disabilities. Under the direction of Mr. William Cashman and his staff, the Task Force met on numerous occasions to develop a position paper that would unify and reflect the concern of the respective states in Region 9.

On July 26, 1976, the Task Force presented to the Advisory Board a position paper for their endorsement. Upon receiving and reviewing the efforts of the Task Force, the Advisory Board unanimously accepted and endorsed the paper as reflecting the position of Region 9. It is the hope of the Advisory Board that the position addressed in this paper will particularly influence the thinking of Region 9 states in further developing guidelines.

Connecticut - Maine - Massachusetts - New Hampshire - New Jersey - Rhode Island - Vermont

A New Jersey State Department of Education Program
in cooperation with the U.S. Office of Education, Bureau of Education for the Handicapped

The Advisory Board is also aware that the United States Commissioner of Education has been charged with examining the current United States Office of Education definition of specific learning disabilities and submitting his recommendations no later than November 29, 1976, one year after the effective date of passage of P.L. 94-142.

The Region 9 Advisory Board hopes that the position addressed herein will ultimately have some impact on those recommendations and on national thought relative to the issue of learning disabilities.

Sincerely,

Tom Gillung

Tom Gillung, Ph.D., Chairman
Region 9 Advisory Board

cc: Dr. Nicholas J. Maldari, Executive Director NELRS
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PREFACE

Northeast Learning Resource System

In September 1974 a network of Learning Resource Systems was funded by the U. S. Office of Education, Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH) under Public Law 91-230, to help provide an appropriate education for the handicapped child. The network is comprised of thirteen regions serving the fifty states and the Trust Territories.

The Northeast Learning Resource System (NELRS), Region 9, is administered by the Branch of Special Education and Pupil Personnel Services, New Jersey State Department of Education. The system, supported by a contract awarded to the State Department of Education by BEH, consists of two regional centers, the Northeast Area Learning Resource Center (NEALRC) and the Northeast Regional Resource Center (NERRC). These centers serve Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Vermont which have formed a board to advise the Northeast Learning Resource System. This Advisory Board consists of the State Director of Special Education from each of the client states, or a person designated by the Director in each state to serve in this capacity. The purpose of the Advisory Board is to make recommendations to the NELRS for current, as well as, proposed activities within the Region.

The major goal of the NERRC is to aid in developing each state's capacity to meet the educational evaluation and program prescription needs of handicapped children. This is accomplished through the development and application of exemplary appraisal and educational programming practices.

Calendar of Events

Region 9 NELRS Advisory Board raised learning disabilities issue and requested position paper	July 1975
NERRC researched learning disabilities definitions and produced a "Summary of Learning Disabilities" document	August - September 1975
Region 9 NELRS Advisory Board requested additional data to develop the position paper	October 1975
Task Force established	February 1976
Initial Meeting	March 24-25, 1976
Second Meeting	May 19-20, 1976
Final Meeting	June 24, 1976
Position Paper submitted to Region 9 NELRS Advisory Board and approved by Board	July 26, 1976

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INTRODUCTION

In the Summer of 1975, the Northeast Learning Resource System Advisory Board (ALRC/RRC) raised concerns regarding the issue of learning disabilities and requested a review of existing definitions. After the NERRC conducted preliminary research on existing definitions, it became evident that more intensive activities were needed. Subsequently, a Task Force on Learning Disabilities was formed to examine this issue.

As viewed by the Advisory Board, the purpose of the Task Force was to develop a position paper relative to learning disabilities in Region 9. The Advisory Board was concerned with the process for identifying youngsters with learning disabilities including such matters as operational definitions, the need for a definition, potential overloading of the category of learning disabilities and possible fragmentation of services.

Accordingly, the NERRC, in conjunction with the seven State Resource Consultants established a Task Force composed of one representative from each state, knowledgeable in the field of learning disabilities, and familiar with his/her State's position.

TASK FORCE ACTIVITIES

The Task Force convened on March 24-25, 1976 in Hartford, Connecticut. The goals of this initial meeting were to:

1) Share information regarding each state's process for identifying children with learning disabilities.

2) Identify client state and Region 9 concerns relative to the issue.

3) Determine a plan for follow-up activities.

State and Regional Concerns

Each state was asked to share information regarding definition, numbers of children classified, guidelines for identification of children with specific learning disabilities, and guidelines for personnel preparation.

In reviewing state guidelines for identification of children with learning disabilities, the Task Force noted that states have varying guidelines. Three clusters of definitions are either presently in use or being proposed for adoption: 1) the definition contained in the Children with Specific Learning Disabilities Act, Public Law 91-230 (1969), 2) definitions that are unique to the particular state, and 3) special needs or some other generic term. The numbers of children identified as learning disabled within the client states range from 1% to 26% of the handicapped population.

In reviewing the assessment processes used by the various client states, the Task Force noted that the identification and assessment models are not unique for learning disabilities, but are also used in the identification and evaluation of all children with special needs. All the client states utilize some variation of a team model in the assessment process. It was also noted that in some cases local districts, rather than the state education agency, determine the guidelines for the identification of children with learning disabilities.

In the area of personnel preparation, some states utilize a generic or non-categorical teacher certification, despite the fact that they have categorical classes for children. Other states have categorical certification or have proposed certification standards or competency based standards. In some states there is a distinction made between an instructional and an educational services certificate.

In addition to sharing the above information at the initial Task Force meeting, state and regional concerns also were identified. The following are statements which refelect those concerns.

In a categorical system several states noted there is a need to develop criteria where none exist in order to obtain reimbursement, especially to maintain the number of learning disabled children at 2% to accommodate the requirement of Public Law 94-142. Another concern was that reimbursement should be based on the provision of special education to eligible children who are included in the continuum of services.

Several states proposed that the classification system itself should be addressed on a state and federal level. Specifically, the following questions were raised: "Does a definition keep us from our task?" and "Should there be a generic definition?" In conjunction with this the belief was expressed that the dual structure of special and regular education hinders comprehensive program development.

It was also noted that <u>if</u> a noncategorical administrative and/or instructional approach is used, criteria need to be developed for service delivery to <u>all</u> special needs children, as is presently being done in varying degrees in Massachusetts, California and Vermont. It was suggested that consistent criteria be developed for all states, especially regarding the process of identification for special needs services.

Several states mentioned that the quality and level of sophistication of assessment needs to be examined. They pointed to the need for an assessment model that not only describes how a child learns but also examines the match between the child and the existing educational environment so that an appropriate educational plan can be developed.

There was strong concern among the client states about the fragmentation of services. It was felt that fragmentation could be avoided by developing competencies and standards for personnel and by delineating responsibilities of various personnel. There was also an expressed need for inservice training of all pupil personnel service specialists, teachers, administrators and other personnel in all regular and special education settings.

In addition, there was an expressed need for a thorough examination of the quality of programming, including program evaluation, accountability, and the efficacy of special education in its relation to regular education.

Task Force Observations

In completing these activities the Task Force went through various stages of awareness. Recognizing that it could not operate in a vacuum, it initially devoted much time and effort examining current literature and data, as well as discussing state and regional concerns. As a result of such research and discussion, the Task Force concluded that among the seven states there were seven different perspectives within the range of problems and their possible solutions.

At this point, the Task Force recognized that its purpose was not to maintain the status quo of Region 9 client states but rather to promote changes throughout the region. Simply developing a new learning disability definition would not serve this end; it was evident from state and regional concerns that the issue had implications beyond the definition of learning disabilities.

Reflective of their professional responsibility and integrity, the participants made a strong commitment to the Task Force and interacted in such a way that they were able to develop a unified position.

Outcomes

At the initial Task Force meeting the decision was made that each Task Force member would develop a professional statement utilizing the information which was shared by participants and other pertinent data. As agreed upon by participants,

the individual professional statements were to reflect long range and immediate goals and objectives. To assist Task Force members in this endeavor, the NERRC summarized the data shared by the participants at the initial meeting and forwarded this "Summary of Proceedings" * to Task Force members.

The Task Force reconvened on May 19-20, 1976 in Hartford, Connecticut, to share their individual position papers and to develop a draft of the document which would reflect the professional ideas and concerns of the Task Force. Another meeting was held on June 24 in Newark, New Jersey, to edit and finalize the position paper.

The statement contained herein is the position taken by the Region 9 Task Force on Learning Disabilities.

* Please Note: Copies of the "Summary of Proceedings," (March 1976), from which the above information has been taken, are available upon request from the Northeast Regional Resource Center, 168 Bank Street, Hightstown, New Jersey 08520

POSITION

The Region 9 Task Force on Learning Disabilities is committed to the belief that all children should be educated according to their respective needs. The ultimate goal is to create school systems which accept responsibility for every child, regardless of his unique characteristics or educational needs. As Leo Buscaglia (1972) wrote, educators must become "attuned to the cries of those the system is destroying". They must become "excited by the future...committed to change...fearless of change...challenged by differences and stimulated by creativity". (p. 262)

It is the further belief of the Task Force that the present diagnostic approach which relies on etiology and categories of classification is not useful for instructional intervention since it ends with the designation of a label, not with the development of an educational plan. An educational assessment should serve as a basis for providing a program which encourages and facilitates a child's development that is consistent with his unique characteristics. As Farrald and Schamber (1972) note, "The appraisal process is of value only if it is characterized by educationally relevant focus and only if it generates differential instructional programs for children". (p.4)

Present diagnostic and placement procedures often lead to what Voller (1968) described as a "one-way ticket to oblivion" for many children in special education classes.

As Hobbs (1975) notes:

> The term learning disability has appeal because it implies a specific neurological condition for which no one can be held particularly responsible, and yet it escapes the stigma of mental retardation. There is no implication of neglect, emotional disturbance, or improper training or education, nor does it imply a lack of motivation on the part of the child. For these cosmetic reasons, it is a rather nice term to have around. However, no one has ever been able to find evidence of the implied impairment. Furthermore, children with known neurological impairments often do not manifest the kinds of behavior associated with the learning disability concept. (pp. 80-81)

It is evident that much time, money and effort have been expended in defining and redefining disabilities and organizing them into categories for special education. Children have then been assessed and labeled, often with tests of questionable validity and reliability, in order to fit them into this categorical system.

Currently, labeling is used for statistical and funding purposes. The Task Force believes that there are alternatives to this method of fiscal accountability. As Gillespie, et al (1975) suggests:

> services for the learning disabled will be improved if legislation decreases its emphasis on categories and concentrates instead on providing mechanisms for

meeting the specific educational needs of individual children. (p. 660)

The labeling of children experiencing learning disabilities should be eliminated and focus should be on the child's performance on educationally relevant tasks. Only individual assessment and educational programming can actually aid children who are having learning difficulties and, more importantly, prevent others from developing learning difficulties. Such a framework requires assessment that analyzes the learning characteristics of the child and the characteristics of the environment that are significant for program planning, implementation and evaluation. The reason for failure or difficulty in learning is often due to a mismatch between the educational environment and the individual child. This would happen less frequently if evaluative instruments and techniques are used which yield a description of the child as a learner.

Instructional programs should be based on a child's observable response to relevant tasks, under various conditions. The emphasis should be on performance not on causology or etiology.

More time, money and effort should not be wasted by perseverating on definitions and categories for the purpose of providing services for children. Rather, the emphasis should be on providing students with more appropriate instructional programs to develop an effective continuum of services. What should be promoted is the sharing of mutual skills, knowledge and competencies essential in facilitating learning and the concept of fighting failure by providing help and support to classroom teachers.

The Region 9 Task Force on Learning Disabilities believes that, along with other handicapping labels and categories, the label, as well as the category, of learning disabilities is unnecessary. Furthermore, efforts should not be expended in determining definitions and criteria for identifying these children on a categorical basis. Rather, efforts should be coordinated in training regular and special education personnel so that their complimentary skills can be merged into a unified process which facilitates professional growth. Only then will children be provided a suitable education as equal members of a total educational community.

Therefore, the Region 9 Task Force concludes that:

1) further attempts at a definition would require an inordinate amount of professional time and is a useless exercise for the purpose of providing services for children

2) a major change in the way we think about and behave toward children labeled as "exceptional" is necessary

3) a better link between general and special education is needed in the process of eliminating this dual structure

4) there is an evident need to provide an alternative to existing practices in the assessment of problems in learning and behavior

5) there is also a need to provide an alternative to categorical funding

6) we should work towards a non-categorical service delivery system of education for all children.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Recognizing that it has stated a position which may be a long-range goal for many local education agencies, state education agencies and the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, the Task Force offers a general outline of factors which may facilitate movement from the existing situation to that proposed herein. These factors or areas of consideration are proposed here to allow for the development and implementation of a noncategorical determination of educational needs and provision of services. The factors are: 1) management, 2) legislation, 3) public participation, 4) funding, 5) data resource network, 6) program options for students and 7) staff development system.

The Task Force does not intend that these areas of consideration be considered all-inclusive. Although the factors may be considered relevant to states other than those in Region 9, they especially reflect a perspective relevant to the seven states in Region 9. The Task Force was not charged with the task of developing strategies. Therefore, the Task Force has listed areas which are general and can be elaborated according to the specific need of each state. The factors are not listed in any sequential order.

Because this position reflects a long range goal requiring much time and effort to implement, the Task Force proposes that the client states in Region 9 establish and support an interstate committee, which should attempt to look at existing models and further examine factors for the implementation of the position proposed herein. For example, the Task Force has identified various aspects of the position that exist within the client states and these can be further explored by an interstate committee.

The Task Force has found that the sharing of information among its respective states has been very valuable and believes this sharing should continue for the benefit of the seven states in Region 9.

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